Judge who defied Trump brings Torah ethos to Maduro trial

WASHINGTON: The 92-year-old judge overseeing the Nicolas Maduro case has said he displays a Hebrew scripture from the Torah on the wall of his Manhattan chambers: Tzedek, tzedek tirdof Justice, justice you shall pursue." An Orthodox Jew who has been on the bench for almost three decades, US District Judge Alvin Hellerstein has been outspoken about how he tries to promote fairness and the impact of his faith on his judicial philosophy.

Hellerstein opened the court hearing on Monday by saying he wants a fair trial for the ousted Venezuelan leader, who pleaded not guilty on Monday to narco-terrorism charges.

"That's my job, and that's my intent," Hellerstein said.

Maduro's defence lawyer, Barry Pollack, said at Monday's hearing he will make "voluminous" pretrial filings seeking dismissal of the case.

Some legal analysts have said Hellerstein's age could become an issue in the case, especially if it drags on.

"The practical reality is that this case will be litigated for a while," said former federal prosecutor Neama Rahmani. "Hellerstein may not be in a position to see it through to the end." Hellerstein did not respond to a request for comment on Tuesday.

Jewish values

Hellerstein said in a 2020 podcast that he schedules sentencing hearings for Fridays, so that he can spend Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday nightfall, reflecting on whether the prison sentence he handed down was appropriate.

Hellerstein has ruled against President Donald Trump in recent years. He has also spoken up when he believes lawyers are not best serving their clients.

In a 2013 law review article, he wrote that some lawyers were "outraged" and accused him of "arrogation of power" when he rejected a $675 million settlement negotiated between New York City and injured first responders who raced to the World Trade Center after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Hellerstein concluded that, while no statute or rule clearly addressed whether the deal needed his blessing, he had inherent authority to reject it as inadequate.

The attorneys ended up presenting Hellerstein with a new settlement that added $125 million for victims.

Hellerstein "is a man of strongly held convictions, and he seeks to find a way to harmonise the law with his understanding of justice," said Mitchell Epner, a former federal prosecutor who has observed Hellerstein on the bench.

Hellerstein has spoken candidly about how his Jewish values affect his decision-making.

"As a judge, and as a Jew, I consider that everything I do reflects God and affects His image," he wrote in the 2013 article.

In the 2020 podcast, Hellerstein said he believes he was "the first Orthodox boy employed by a gentile or Jewish firm in New York City."

"I'm pleased to say that after me there were others, and some credited me with having broken the precedent," Hellerstein said.

Hellerstein already had a long career before President Bill Clinton nominated him to the federal bench in 1998.

From 1957 to 1960, Hellerstein served in the Judge Advocate General's Corps, the legal arm of the United States Army.

In 1960, Hellerstein joined the now-defunct firm of Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, where he ended up practicing for much of his career.

Legal gambits

In a high-profile case in 2020, Hellerstein ordered the release of former Trump personal lawyer Michael Cohen, after Trump's Justice Department tried to revoke his home confinement and return him to jail.

Hellerstein concluded that Trump's administration was retaliating against Cohen for writing a book.

In 2023, Hellerstein denied a request by Trump to move to federal court his New York criminal case relating to a hush money payment to adult film actress Stormy Daniels. Trump was tried in state court and found guilty of 34 felony counts. In May 2025, Hellerstein rejected an effort by the Trump administration to use a wartime law to send alleged gang members to Venezuela, saying the men had been improperly denied their day in court.

"This is the United States of America," he said. "People are being thrown out of the country because of their tattoos." —Reuters

AN artist dressed Elvis Presley style poses with a fan while boarding the train.—Reuters

Presley-themed train departs for tribute festival

SYDNEY: Elvis Presley fans and tribute artists kicked off their annual journey to the Elvis Festival in the Australian regional town of Parkes on Wednesday.

Enthusiasts, dressed in Elvis-style clothing, converged on Central Station in Sydney before embarking on a 357 km (222 miles) westward journey on the Elvis Express, a special train organised by the festival.

The seven-hour railway trip features a continuous line-up of Elvis-themed entertainment, including tribute artists performing some of the King's greatest hits. "For the last two years I've been told how incredible this festival is ... I made the conscious decision to come this year and I'm already thankful that I've come, one day in," said Louis Brown, an Elvis tribute artist who flew from the UK to attend the event.

Organisers of the Parkes Elvis Festival, which typically takes place during the second week of January every year, expect around 24,000 attendees — double the town's permanent population.—Reuters

Financial crisis forces UN agency to fire 571 employees in Gaza

GENEVA: The UN's beleaguered agency for Palestinian refugees said on Wednesday that a "dire" financial crisis had this week forced it to fire hundreds of staff who had left the territory.

"On Tuesday, 571 local UNRWA staff, outside Gaza, were informed that they were being separated from the agency with immediate effect," a spokesperson said.

For more than seven decades, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees has provided aid and assistance across Gaza, the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

But the agency has seen the voluntary contributions it relies on dwindle as it has become the focus of increasingly harsh Israeli criticism and attacks, causing an unprecedented financial crisis.

While the work UNRWA was mandated to do cost $880 million last year, the agency received only around $570m in contributions, the spokesperson said. "As things stand, we expect a substantial shortfall in 2026."

All of the staff affected by this week's announcement had originally worked in the Gaza Strip, but had managed to leave early after the conflict broke out in Oct 2023. —AFP

MEMBERS of a militia supporting the Aden-based government stand beside an armoured vehicle.—AFP

Saudis strike Yemen after separatist leader skips talks

ADEN: A Saudi-led coalition struck the home province of Yemen's separatist leader on Wednesday, after he failed to show up for talks in Riyadh and was kicked out of the country's presidential body.

The coalition said it had given Aidaros Alzubidi a 48-hour ultimatum to come to Riyadh for discussions, after his Southern Transitional Council (STC) grabbed swathes of territory last month.

They were rolled back by the Saudi-led coalition and allied Yemeni forces in recent days.

But he failed to board the flight carrying his delegation, and the coalition struck his home province of al-Dhale after accusing him of mobilising "large forces" there.

Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, which holds executive power and includes rival separatists and Saudi-backed figures, then announced Alzubidi's removal, accusing him of high treason.

The showdown between Yemen's rival factions has raised fears that its second city, Aden, where the STC insisted its leader was still located, could be drawn into the violence.

The STC's advance and the Saudi response have also sent relations with the United Arab Emirates, a fellow oil power and rival power-broker in Yemen, plummeting.

Lost contact

The separatists said they were open to discussions but warned they had lost contact with their delegation in Riyadh, urging Saudi authorities to guarantee their safety.

On Wednesday, more than 15 air strikes hit Dhale, a local official said, killing four people, according to two hospital sources.

Alzubidi "fled to an unknown location... after he had distributed weapons and ammunition to dozens of elements inside Aden", coalition spokesperson Major General Turki al-Maliki said in a statement.

The coalition carried out strikes to prevent Alzubidi from "escalating the conflict" and extending it into Dhale governorate, he said.

An STC official said that Alzubidi decided not to join the delegation flying to Saudi Arabia for talks after hearing he would be asked to dissolve his group, which forms part of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) governing government-held Yemen.

Later, the STC said it had lost contact with the delegation following its arrival in Riyadh, urging Saudi Arabia to "guarantee the safety of its delegation currently in Riyadh".—Agencies

'He's not that happy with me': Trump mocks Modi while recalling meeting

Dawn Report

KARACHI: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday jibed at Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi while recounting a meeting between the two, where the Indian PM had asked to meet the US president.

While addressing the House GOP (Grand Old Party) Members' Retreat, Trump recounted a meeting with Modi, stating that Modi had ordered 68 Apache attack helicopters from the US and had waited five years.

"Prime Minister Modi came to see me. [He said] 'Sir, may I see you, please?' Yes," Trump recalled.

"I have a very good relationship with him. He's not that happy with me because, you know, they're paying a lot of tariffs now, because they're not doing the oil," he added, referring to India halting imports of Russian oil. Trump also noted that the US is "getting rich because of tariffs".

Meanwhile, India's opposition Congress party took to X and uploaded a caricature of the scene, showing a timid Modi. In a separate post in Hindi, Congress claimed that Modi went to the US uninvited to meet Trump after he took office last January, quoting the Indian PM's request to meet him.

"You must remember — among the world's leaders, Modi is the only one whom Trump did not come to receive at the gate," the party wrote, attaching a video of Trump's remarks.

In response to the remarks, Indian lawmaker Priyanka Chaturvedi took to X and wrote, "His (Trump's) condescending tone for India's PM is demeaning. The GoI's (Government of India) silence to all his insulting statements is bizarre because it reflects poorly on our nation." Former Indian minister Subhramanian Swamy shared this post.

The US is imposing 50 per cent tariffs on New Delhi over its purchase of Russian oil, causing tensions to rise between the world's two largest democracies and strategic partners.

A 25pc tariff was imposed due to India's purchases of Russian oil, adding to Trump's 25pc tariff on products from India.

Political prisoners' release

Continued from Page 1

an invitation — a move that lends little credence to the NDC's claim of representing the opposition.

PTI's Asad Qaiser told *Dawn* that the PTI did not participate in the dialogue as a party. "It was an independent effort which should be recognised. It is a fact that there is a need for a new charter of democracy in Pakistan," he agreed. The PTI leader, however, said the opposition party would continue its efforts on the TTAP platform.

Practical steps

In its statement also posted on 'X', the NDC leaders suggested that "comprehensive, concrete and practical steps be taken immediately for dialogue and confidence-building at the national level". These included the immediate release of "political workers", including PTI women leaders, who were behind bars and the quashing of cases against them.

"Restrictions on political activities should be lifted. Complete freedom of political activities should be ensured within the framework of the Constitution and law," it said. The NDC also called for the appointment of opposition leaders in the National Assembly and Senate — posts that have been vacant since August 7, 2025.

It further said that "censorship imposed on the media should be ended and restrictions imposed on anchor(persons) should be lifted".

The moot also expressed concern over the "political unrest in the country, the economic difficulties facing the country and its people, restrictions on political activities and the media, and the challenge of terrorism". "The government and opposition forces should not use the Pakistan armed forces for their politics and should not spread negative propaganda," the statement added.

Speaking at the event, Awaam Pakistan chief Shahid Khaqan Abbasi said, "This is not an issue of Imran Khan's release but of the country's release. If the country is in the right condition, then Imran Khan sahib's issue will get resolved too." His party spokesperson Dr Zafar Mirza told *Dawn* that the former premier was representing Awaam Pakistan at the event.

TTAP top leadership to visit Lahore

Separately, a TTAP delegation is set to depart for a three-day visit to Lahore as part of the opposition's "street mobilisation", said a statement from the alliance's spokesperson, Hussain Yousafzai.

The group includes TTAP chief Mehmood Khan Achakzai, senior vice chairman Allama Raja Nasir, vice chairman Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar and Secretary General Asad Qaiser. The TTAP leaders will organise "political and social meetings" in Lahore, the statement said, adding that the politicians will also hold meetings at Zaman Park, Imran Khan's residence in the provincial capital.

PIA lost over Rs30bn due to negligence

Continued from Page 1

WB-737 aircraft. It observed that the failure to dispose of spare parts showed negligence and inefficiency.

Besides losing Rs2.61bn due to the non-implementation of the board of directors regarding properties, and another Rs1.669bn due to irregular payments made without validation of the user department, PIA also suffered a loss of Rs0.112bn from the irregular procurement of stores and spares. The audit pointed out that PIA management had procured various items without observing Public Procurement Regulatory Authority rules and through non-prequalified vendors.

In justification to these objections raised by the Auditor General's office, defence ministry officials said aircraft were grounded due to restrictions following the coronavirus pandemic. They contended that grounding aircraft became necessary due to global supply chain issues. Officials attributed the grounding to structural repairs, financial constraints and payment issues affecting the ability to conduct timely maintenance.

"The delays in the roll-out of these aircraft were caused by unscheduled repairs in the fuselage structure," the defence ministry said. "Structural repairs are both unforeseen and require additional time and materials."

The ministry added that leases on these aircraft were also reduced to a minimum.

Likewise, the defence ministry said that parts worth Rs3.8bn had already been disposed of and the remaining inventory would be sold according to procedure. The meeting was further informed that the spare parts would be acquired by the bidders that purchased PIA.

Regarding the purchasing disputes, the defence ministry said that procurement of parts became necessary to keep operations running.

"Mission/flight critical equipment, which was highly expensive and specified by the original equipment manufacturers was necessary," a senior defence ministry official said.

Several other audit objections raised during the session were referred to the departmental accounts committee to handle fact-finding inquiries.

Crowds pay tribute as Brigitte Bardot is buried in Saint-Tropez

SAINT TROPEZ: People lined the streets of Saint-Tropez on Wednesday, applauding as the coffin of French cinema icon Brigitte Bardot, who died last month aged 91, was driven through the Riviera resort after her funeral.

Bardot shot to international fame in her early 20s in the film *And God Created Woman*, her tousled hair and fierce energy radiating a charisma that captivated 1950s France.

Known affectionately as B.B. by many in France, Bardot's roles made her not just a bombshell, but a pop culture icon and a touchstone for changing social attitudes. She became the first celebrity to model for a bust of Marianne, the traditional symbol of the French Republic that adorns French town halls.

"For me, Brigitte Bardot is France," said singer Mireille Mathieu, 79, who sang at the funeral. "She was the most beautiful woman in the world," Mathieu told reporters, praising "that freedom she (Bardot) had, that boldness to say what she thought."

At the funeral, in the town's Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption church, a black-and-white picture of Bardot hugging a baby seal was on display, with the words "Merci Brigitte" (Thank you Brigitte), near her coffin, covered in mostly orange and yellow flowers. Outside, one man held a placard that read: "The animals thank Brigitte Bardot".

"It was really magnificent," Bardot fan Fanny Wisselmann said of the ceremony. "I found that it reflected Brigitte Bardot, it was simple, it was very respectful," she said. Displaying a tattoo of Bardot on her leg, Wisselmann, who lives in Frejus, about an hour's drive away, said she is such a fan it was unthinkable she wouldn't be there to pay tribute.

FRENCH activist Jean-Baptiste Redde holds a placard reading 'Animals thank Brigitte Bardot', at Notre-Dame de l'Assomption church in Saint-Tropez.—AFP

'Activism, sympathies'

Bardot made the last of her 42 films in 1973. Disenchanted with the industry, she declared the world of cinema "rotten".

She became a tireless crusader for animal rights while her political sympathies shifted to the far-right National Front. Incendiary remarks on immigration, Islam, and homosexuality saw her convicted multiple times for inciting racial hatred.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen was among those attending Wednesday's funeral. Bardot had publicly endorsed the National Front's successive leaders, Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter Marine, whom she once referred to as "the Joan of Arc of the 21st century".

Aurore Berge, Macron's minister for equality and a defender of animal rights, was there to represent the government. Anti-whaling activist Paul Watson was also among the guests at the funeral.

Private burial

After the funeral, Bardot was buried in strict privacy in a cemetery in the glitzy town where she lived for much of her later life behind high walls, surrounded by a menagerie of cats, dogs, and horses.

A tribute open to locals and fans will take place later in the day at the Pre des Pecheurs area in the old town quarter called La Ponche, the historic centre of the former fishing village.

Bardot told *Le Monde* in 2018 that she wished to be buried in a quiet corner of her garden. But the Var Prefecture said it never received any request for a private burial, which would have been needed to bury her in her garden.—Reuters